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AUTHOR Stearns, Peter N.
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ABSTRACT

The bulk of the most innovative and widely noted research over the past 20 years has fallen into the category of social history. It adds a list of new topics to the understanding of the past and a sense of excitement that traditional history instruction lacks. It has the potential of bringing a wider range of students toward an interest in history. This social history update, while skimming over the now familiar groundwork, responds to recent distractions and distortions in educational policy statements, uses criticism to improve the articulation of social history's teaching purpose, and acknowledges the important maturation in thinking about the field and its relationship with other history teaching goals. Social history should be widely implemented in elementary-secondary education where it can introduce students to the real range of history while their attitudes toward the discipline are being formed. Assessments of the criticisms of the discipline from the political right need to be made to show the weaknesses of the arguments. Three advances in social history teaching are examined. The "big changes" approach focuses on important events occurring in major time periods. "Mentalities history" focuses on the intensely-held beliefs and attitudes of large groups of people. The "state and society" approach integrates social history with traditional history instruction. These approaches are not entirely worked out and they require teacher interpretation. Conclusions suggest that the signposts are in place for a further redirection of history instruction that can combine old and new ways to find challenge and coherence in the past. (GEA)

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Teaching Social History: An Update

Peter N. Stearns
Carnegie Mellon University

During the past decade, a number of history educators have discussed the reasons for including social history approaches and findings in mainstream history teaching, and also various mechanisms by which this can be done. The subject was compelling because of social history's surge on the discipline's research agenda. Currently over a third of all research historians in the United States add the "social" label,and there is little question that the bulk of the most innovative and widely-noted research over the past twenty years has fallen in this category (think back for example to how little was known or taught about slavery in US history surveys just a generation ago). It was compelling also because social history added both a list of new topics to the understanding of the past -- from demographic behavior to basic leisure forms -- and a sense of excitement that more conventional staples were largely missing.It was compelling, finally, because it posed some obvious challenges: social history topics did not fit neatly into the established agenda -- how can one combine analysis of the rise of soccer with a narrative of later-19th-century British politics?; many social historians borrowed methods and concepts, ranging from quantification through sociology to -- most recently -- anthropology that were different from standard descriptive political or intellectual history; and finally, social historians, quite apart from their topic choice, had a style and focus that were distinctive, in that they examined trends and processes as their empirical core, rather than events and individual personalities.

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Teaching social history meant, in sum, a good bit of new learning. It meant deciding what familiar topics to curtail in favor of wider coverage. It meant figuring out how to juxtapose event-based chronology -- the series of wars, reigns or presidencies that from the backbone of traditional textbook history -- with shifts in processes such as the advent of a new birth or death rate pattern,where hundreds of thousands of separate events -- decisions about children, sex and health -- accumulated over a decade or more into a new demographic framework.Doing social history in the classroom was not easy.

Yet there were also some obvious attractions toward making the attempts. The field was vibrant. It produced undeniable new knowledge, which could add to students' factual fund and also stimulate historically-informed thinking about a host of topics significant in their own lives and society -- such as the nature of adolescence, and its emergence as a discrete life-phase in the 19th century. Social history provided potential links with other social sciences,though the interdisciplinary promise was sometimes more rhetorical than real; in dealing with topics like family, social history might bridge among components of a larger social studies curriculum, with students benefiting from improved integration.Social history topics, finally, might bring a wider range of students toward an interest in history than a staple diet of politics and high culture by themselves achieved. Serious history of key groups such as women, workers and Afro-Americans spurred the new research, but also had obvious applicability to engaging various sectors of the student population. New topics such as leisure or family might similarly draw some students in toward serious discussion of problems of change and continuity,

because of their immediacy in contemporary life. For a host of reasons, then, the urge to deal seriously with social history as a teaching area has remained strong, despite undeniable practical and conceptual problems.

As a result, social history has been frequently defined and justified, its major subfields outlined as subjects for classroom use. College Board recommendations have urged serious attention to the field as a prerequisite for successful college work. The National Council on Social Studies has issued a number of valuable how-to pamphlets, as have numerous other organizations.[1] After a slight lag, when focus riveted on research strategies, social historians themselves began producing textbooks and supplementary materials, particularly but not exclusively at the college level.[2] Workshops, along with revisions in college curricula, helped spread the word to many lively teachers both old and new. Any discussion of social history in teaching by now proceeds along a well-trodden path.

Indeed given the coverage available on the subject of social history teaching, why return to the charge? There are three reasons. First, suggestions for altering some time-tested teaching strategies take time to sink home, perhaps particularly in a discipline that many practitioners fancy precisely because it seems familiar, the intellectual equivalent of well-scuffed slippers. Second, a recent surge of counterattacks continues to require comment. Third, and most important, significant bases for synthesis, developed in social history as a research field,offer new promise for history teaching, in settings that require some means of linking social history's novelty to some of the staples of political and intellectual coverage.

A social history update, then, while skimming over the now-familiar groundwork, is timely in several sense. It allows response to some recent

distractions and distortions in a number of educational policy statements, while also using criticism to improve the articulation of social history's teaching purpose. It permits a clear acknowledgement of important maturation in thinking about the field and its relationship with other history teaching goals. Evaluation of social history teaching today cannot and need not be confined to the valid but often slightly abstract sketches offered a decade ago; gratifyingly, there is progress to report.

Reconsidering the Standard Menu

An update report must begin, however, on a more prosaic note, in commenting on lags and disjunctures in introducing social history to the teaching repertoire. Development has been real, but uneven, and some initial efforts at simplification proved misleading.

There is no question that social history teaching has advanced far more rapidly in college curricula than in the schools, and while this disparity was initially unsurprising, given social history's research-driven impulse, it has become counter-productive,among other things in failing to introduce students to history's real range when their attitudes toward the discipline are being formed. A host of imaginative teachers in the high schools have, to be sure, pressed forward into at least some aspects of social history, not only in survey courses but in social studies offerings where the interdisciplinary potential can be tapped. And some social history staples have entered even more widely: units on slavery and immigrants have important social history content. But for all the achievement, the hesitations are still more striking. High-prestige offerings including Advanced Placement U.S. (despite serious College Board encouragement to the contrary), and Western civ. courses even

more generally, often and perversely insist on strictly political and high-culture definitions, adding college-level but highly dated readings to testify to their advanced level, rather than really catching up with the field. Survey textbooks and their publishers remain timid.

Furthermore, in courses and texts alike, some intially understandable transitions have not been adequately rethought, despite their limitations. Some school curricula, responding to well-intentioned guidelines, define their social history in terms of touching base with almost every conceivable American ethnic group, to demonstrate that all the ingredients of the melting pot have a significant past. The proposition is correct, but at the teaching level unwieldy, producing unnecessary, and highly vulnerable, incoherence. Larger themes, illustrated by particularly significant or exemplary groupings, can and must be found. Another approach is still more frustrating: adding an occasional social history snippet to an otherwise conventional survey. In texts, the snippet approach shows in an occasional "this is how they lived" insert, or tacked-on segments on such subjects as women in colonial society. In actual courses, the same filler approach shows in the odd day devoted to a social history topic, with no coherence or system applied. Students, of course, readily perceive the change in tone, often correctly assuming that the social history is intended as light relief and will not be tested. Here too, the experience of teaching good social history is now sufficient to suggest some corrective guidelines: deal with social history topics with a seriousness equal to other coverage; return to topics in each key time period so that the family, for example, can be seen in terms of changes and continuities over time, rather than as an institution evoked haphazardly; and provide some opportunity to discuss the relationship between the social history topics and other developments, as in efforts to show how family change results from new political or economic forms or impacts on these forms in turn.

Social history teaching at other educational levels has moved forward more rapidly. As a means of introducing young students to the past, social history topics have long been a primary school staple, and one recent report urges an enhancement of the concentration of this level.[3] Social history courses, and subfield topical courses on family, work, women and a host of other subjects, dot college curricula, usually paralleling more conventional national-history or period offerings but in some cases increasingly upstaging them. Even here, however, curriculum problems have by no means entirely been resolved. Much of the task of pulling the past together is left to students themselves, as social historians merrily spin off one topical course after another, not even stopping to talk about what ties their field together in terms of central causal forces or periodization, while conventional courses, including many surveys, introduce serious social history analysis warily if at all. The past is much richer than it once was, at the college level, and students themselves, returning to history courses in new numbers in recent years, reflect the excitement. But opportunities to discuss coherence or interrelationships are, too often, few and far between.

In fact, at both high school and college levels, two satisfactory integrative approaches are now possible, well tested in many programs, and simply requiring wider awareness and utilitzation. In a school or collegiate freshman survey course or in a larger college-level history curriculum, social history topics and analytical styles (with their focus on trends and processes) can be carefully and systematically alternated with narrative coverage, with opportunities to discuss interrelationships and interpretive problems in each major period. Or the processes approach can be applied to political and intellectual history as well as the social residue, so that students are introduced to major changes in governments forms and functions just as they are to new patterns of work, major shifts in demograpic balance,

or changing beliefs about children. Periodization, in this second and more ambitious rendering, involves discussion of what kinds of change take a leading role -- allowing the possibility that at some points the state holds center stage but at others, less overtly political beliefs and behaviors.[4]

A social history teaching update can, in sum, note the obvious: that there has been more routine-mindedness in the teaching of history, and more token or incoherent experiments in embracing bits of social history, than seems by now either necessary or justifiable. It can also note serious teaching strides and some frameworks, available in the better college-level texts and in courses at several levels, that allow a systematic presentation of major sociohistorical patterns and their connection to the more standard historical fare. It remains necessary to exhort, lest the teaching of history lag needlessly behind available historical knowledge and insight, but it is also possible to cite significant improvements in experience and in pedagogical conceptualization. Models exist to guide more and more teaching programs past the toe-wetting stage.

Counter-Countering

But is the need to rethink still valid? have we perhaps gone too far? The second facet of the social history teaching update must recognize a recent mood of counterattack, as teachers held back by a sense of routine are joined by powerful voices urging that conventionality is precisely what we need or should return to. Critics such as Gertrude Himmelfarb argue that social history distracts students form the lessons of rational policy actors, whose example can teach the validity of reasoned political action. A host of pundits

urge that history education should consist of a series of factual staples, mainly Western and derived from politics and high culture alone; otherwise the educational process has failed. Reports remind of the abysmal ignorance of contemporary students about political institutions and salient features of the constitution, geography and other time-tested subjects (though they interestingly fail to venture any historical comparisons, for example with familiar examples from World War II inductees who were not exactly paragons of political knowledge themselves, even though uncorrupted by social history). The implication is that social history is one of a series of faddish innovations that have fatally distracted from the past's right stuff.Reaganite federal agencies, spearheaded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, have taken up the charge, withdrawing earlier support from social history educational projects in favor of an emphasis on great texts and other movements of our uniquely privileged past.[5]

Amid this barrage, and having admitted that social history gained less consistent ground as a teaching subject even before the assualt,can there be any response?

The answer is a ringing affirmative, though it must be carefully phrased. The attack on social history has three prongs, and though they are linked in the minds of some critics they must be dissociated. The first prong is purely political. Conservatives do not like social history's emphasis on the common man or on any derogation from a consesus political past. They have a right to their views, but dissent is easy. Social historians have argued for rationality, though on the part of ordinary people, for example in protest action or family decisions, and not just a chosen elite.History education

should be designed primarily to teach students a certain analytical and factual perspective, not a single set of values including some convenient political myths.Social history contributes to this analytical process, while embracing no single political perspective of its own. Reaganites may wish students to ponder Plato and believe that our institutions are jointly sanctified by the ancient Greekss and by God, and they manipulate educational monies to this end, but they can be contested.

The second prong to the critical attack involves an sssumption that new historical knowledge cannot be combined with necessary elements of more conventional fare, and so history education must be defined in terms of the latter alone. Again,it seems to me easy to disagree. History is not simply the study of new topics like crime patterns and sexuality, but it is not simply a list of presidential administrations either. To fix the historical canon in a single list of facts is to deny the contribution of history in adding to the store of knowledge about how humans and human societies function -- and thereby ultimately to limit and sterilize the discipline's teaching appeal. The list of necessary facts from the past has changed, and should continue to change, and while the result may indeed downgrade some of the less significant conventional staples it does not therefore lead to educational deterioration. Himmelfarb's criticism among other things singled out a statement of mine urging that students must know the history of menarche along with that of monarchy. Obviously I was trying to be amusing in linking the two terms, but I would still defend the fundamental thought. A historical understanding of basic demographic shifts is arguably as important as grasping changes in monarchial styles -- not more important, but as much so. The past has more varied corners, and hence more varied uses, than some recent critics even remotely glimpse.

~~The New Coherences~~

This leaves as the final prong, which social historians must indeed attend to and not simply refute: students do not know enough about history of any sort, old or new. It is unquestionably dismaying to find substantial ignorance of geographical and historical basics, among entering college students (or even worse, departing students) otherwise bright. History teachers, social or otherwise, have an obligation to try to repair the worst omissions, and this without any doubt means devoting serious attention to some items besides the staples of a social history diet. But an extension of this undeniable problem into a statement that social history should be dismissed as an unwarranted distraction is incorrect. Student ignorance is not, empirically, the result of large doses of social history teaching in the schools, since in the main these doses have yet to be administered. A fairly conventional regimen of largely political history continues to prevail, and if it is not doing the job then other remedies must be sought. Attention to some serious social history in school curricula will distract form some details of conventional coverage, for there is no denying that some choices must be made.But it need not distract, and should not distract, from adequate coverage of essential features of political history. To the extent the social history can liven a history classroom, and improve analytical skills, it might even improve coverage of the basics. But the main point is that, with social history, the basics have changed, not completely but in part, requiring a diffferent definition of what students should know and different criteria for lamentations about ignorance.

There is a problem here, in other words, that consists of inadequate student knowledge of conventional essentials but also newer historical

essentials. The problem must be addressed by better and more rigorous teaching at many levels. It should not, however, excuse teachers from attending to social history curriculum components. It should not obfuscate the extent to which educational conservatives are attempting to maintain or reconvert history teaching not to an exploration of the past, but to politically-useful mythmaking, an agenda that should be modified by teaching a good historically-critical sense -- which social history can help provide.

The New Coherence

And this brings us to the third, and most positive, element of the update on social history teaching. Educators, including social historians, who have worried about including social history components into teaching at various levels have long and correctly cited two related issues: the centrifugal tendencies of social history itself, as it splinters into hosts of difficult-to-relate subtopics,and the barriers to contacts with most conventional history raised by the proliferation of new topics and enhanced, for a time, by social historians who proudly proclaimed their independence from political subject matter. While issues of synthesis and integration have by no means been entirely resolved, approaches are under elaboration that move forward in exciting ways.

One advance consists quite simply of asking historians, in presenting any large view of the past, to define what "big changes" were occurring any in major time period. This approach was first put foward by Charles Tilly, who defined the big changes in modern Western history in a particular way, but it can be appropriated by others whose definitions might differ somewhat.[6] The point is not to claim a single interpretive formula -- which pre-social history never provided either -- but the basis for a coherent line of argument

that pulls together older history coverage, in its essentials, and newer social history topics alike.

Take, for example, the emergence of a new, property-less proletariat in Western Europe in the 16th-17th centuries. This emergence obviously altered social structure and redefined issues of social mobility. It helps explain new patterns of crime and political response, including the rise of the prison. It called, in other words, for new state functions. It contributes to new attitudes about poverty and to major cultural eruptions such as witchcraft history. It obviously impacts on the nature of economic activity and on work, and began even to play a role redefining family life. Here is, furthermore, a phenomenon that would undergo important elaboration over time, allowing a periodization into the later 20th century that does not lose sight of a central basic phenomenon; and it would extend geographically, affecting United States history, for example, increasingly from the late 18th century onward with some similar effects to those that had already emerged in Western Europe.[7] Proletarianization does not unlock every modern historical door, but it links a number of apparently disparate developments and cuts across sociohistorical and conventional historical domains. It contributes toward greater manageability in a sociohistorically-sensitive curriulum.

In addition to the big changes approach, of which the rise of a proletariat in only one example, two new interest areas have been developing, in teaching and research alike, that have similar integrating qualities. They are indeed compatible with a "big changes" line of inquiry, but merit separate consideration.

The first development involves the growing interest in the history of mentalities, defined in terms of intensely-held beliefs and attitudes (as

opposed to casual or fickle opinions) on the part of large groups of people. Mentalities history meets key sociohistorical tests: it applies to ordinary people, though to elites as well; it accommodates to new topics (such as the study of emotional change); it deals with values about a range of facets of social life -- about family, self, sexuality, leisure -- and not simply about the state or Newtonian laws. But mentalities history is not simply another in a long list of topical innovations. It pulls together disparate strands. It forces the historian to deal with relationships between ideas about family, say, with ideas about physical nature -- to look for basic elements. And it forces the historian also to deal with large swathes of conventional history. When popular beliefs change, as was the case in Western society in the late 17th-early 18th century, what relationship does this change have to formal intellecutual activity covered by such terms as scientific revolution and Enlightenment? (The answer, not surprisingly, turns out to be a reciprocal: new beliefs helped spur formal intellectual change at the creative summit, but were further affected by new elite ideas.) Mentalities history, in other words, pulls serious intellectual history into a new and more meaningful context, while doing careful justice to its essentials. Finally, despite the undeniable bias toward cultural causation, mentalities history must also consider political and economic changes as sources of new popular beliefs.Growing commercialism and the expansion of state functions turn out to feed early modern mentalities transformations, along with new science.[9]

Along with mentalities history, finally,has come a new concern for a "state and society" approach.[10] This involves utilization of the new findings and approaches of social history while resolutely putting the state back into overall equation. As with mentalities, the result can pull in a host of

sociohistorical facets. Families mirror power relationships, and childhood socialization must be particularly considered. Leisure activities relate importantly to political expressions or serve as their surrogates. Mentalities obviously have a strong political component, since people have political attitudes along with other deep beliefs. Crime, social structure, work relationships -- the list is long. But the state is an important actor as well, which necessitates serious examination of changes in state form, constituencies, functions, and key policies. The result of a state and society approach is not simply conventional political history. Certain kinds of detail, about cabinet machinations, become less important. Attention to government function, and to the real impact of the state in addition to professed intent of policy, looms larger, as does the relationship of large groups to political power and political expectations. But political coverage is a central piece in the puzzle.

The big changes approach, mentalities history and state-and-society coverage are by no means entirely worked out, nor do they dictate a single set of judgments about how particular societies change. In this sense,teachers must still be prepared to carve out something of their own synthesis, aided by selection of appropriate scholarship old and new.But the bases for valid synthesis have been laid in recent work. It is no longer either necessary or valid to dismiss social history's teaching role with knowing asides about lack of integration or a hopeless distance form the other aspects of the past that must be taught. Important progess in synthesis translates directly to the classroom, and makes insisting in sticking to routine coverage less excuable than ever before. The holy grail of a total history, in which every piece of

the past's puzzle is neatly interlocked, escapes us still, and it always will. History instruction, like history scholarship,must remain a creative endeavor, calling for and teaching the art of interpreting ~~as~~ an often-elusive reality. The signposts are nevertheless in place for a further redirection of history teaching that can combine new ways and old of finding challenge and coherence in the past.

FOOTNOTES

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2. As examples see Gary B. Nash, Julie R. Jeffrey and others, The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society (New York, 1986); Constance Bouchard and Peter N. Stearns, Life and Society in the West, 2v. (San Diego, 1987); and at the high school level, Linda W. Rosenzweig and Peter N. Stearns, Themes in Modern Social History (Pittsburgh, 1985).

3. Bradley Commission on History in Schools, Building a History Curriculum (Westlake, OH, 1988).

4. Realistic teaching strategy options are explored in Bernard R. Gifford, ed., History in the Schools: What Shall We Teach? (New York, 1988).

5. Gertrude Himmelfarb, The New History and the Old (Cambridge, MA, 1987); Allan Bloom, The Closing of the American Mind (New York, 1986).

6. For a convenient introduction to the Tilly approach and other integrating essays, see Olivier Zunz, ed., Reliving the Past: The Worlds of Social History (Chapel Hill, NC, 1985).

7. Pieter Spierenburg, The Spectacle of Suffering. Executions and the Evolution of Repression; From a Preindustrial Metropolis to the European Experience (Cambridge, 1984); Pieter Spiernenburg, "From Amsterdam to Auburn: An Explanation for the Rise of the Prison in Seventeenth-Century Holland and Nineteenth-Century America," Journal of Social History 20 (1987): 439-62; John R. Gillis, For Better or Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present (New York, 1985).

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